

American held by Nicaragua

CIA denies link to survivor of downed plane

Paul Goepfert
Special to The Tribune

MANAGUA, Nicaragua—The Sandinista military Tuesday was interrogating an American, the only survivor of the four-man crew of a transport plane shot down in Nicaragua Sunday.

The Nicaraguan government charged that the flight was a CIA mission to ferry supplies to U.S.-backed rebels, but the CIA said the agency was not involved.

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson said: "The guy doesn't work for us and CIA is not involved. . . . There are congressional restrictions on assistance to the contras and we do not break those restrictions."

U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz told a Washington press conference that it "wasn't an American [government] cargo plane," but was hired by "private people," including Americans.

The Nicaraguan Defense Ministry had announced Monday that Sandinista army troops had shot down midday Sunday the transport plane bringing supplies and munitions to Nicaraguan insurgents on the Tule River, some 20 miles north of the town of San Carlos near the Costan Rican border.

The Ministry of Defense communique also stated that the only survivor of the four-man crew was a U.S. citizen, who had identified himself as Eugen Hafenfuf, 35, a military adviser based in El Salvador.

The communique further stated that the surviving crew member identified the other members who died in the crash as U.S. citizens.

Relatives in Wisconsin said the man's name was Eugene Hasenfus, 45, of Marinette, and that he had been working for a Florida freight service. A brother, William Hasenfus, of Oshkosh, said Eugene is a former marine aircraft loadmaster who once ran a parachuting school with him.

William Hasenfus said he did not know the name or location of the Florida air

freight service.

A spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Managua, Alberto Fernandez, asked about the incident, said the Nicaraguan authorities had not yet formally told the embassy of the incident by this morning. "We are sending a note to the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry asking for more information, which we do in all cases in which Americans are mentioned," he said.

"We now have Americans dying in Mr. Reagan's dirty war being waged against Nicaragua," Alejandro Bendana, Foreign Ministry secretary-general, said on ABC's "Nightline" program. "This brings us closer to a direct Nicaragua-United States confrontation."

He later claimed on ABC's "Good Morning America" that the plane was on "a CIA operation with CIA operatives."

As of midday Tuesday, the Nicaraguan government had not yet presented the surviving crew member to the local and international press. A small group of photojournalists was to have been flown in to the jungle crash site Monday

but, because of heavy rainstorms, the helicopters were unable to enter the area.

Nicaraguan Defense Ministry spokesperson Lt. June Mulligan said the group of journalists was en route to the site Tuesday morning at 10:30 local time. Lt. Mulligan said, however, that the surviving crew member would not immediately be made available to journalists.

She said that he would be debriefed first by Sub-Commandante Roberto Calderon, Sandinista military commander in the region, and then brought to Managua for further interrogation before being presented.

She said that the Defense Ministry did hope, however, to present the crew member to the press sometime Tuesday.

A spokesperson for the U.S. Military Group stationed in El Salvador denied that anyone with that name was presently on active duty in El Salvador. The spokesperson said he did not know if Eugen Hafenfuf had ever in the past been stationed in El Salvador but added: "I don't recognize that name. But in any case no one from MILGROUP would be involved in such activities."

The spokesperson also was unable to identify Hafenfuf as a freelance mercenary who may have been working in El Salvador. He said: "That sort of thing is not MILGROUP's business. You'd have to ask some other agency."

The Nicaraguan Defense Ministry said that the crew member identified as Eugen Hafenfuf had parachuted to safety after the plane, tentatively identified by the Defense Ministry as a C-123 transport plane, was hit by a ground-to-air, shoulder-held missile by Sandinista troops.

The crew member was then captured by Sandinista troops. It is not known at this time if the crew member surrendered peacefully or if he was in any way wounded.

